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BANK APOLOGIZES, SORT OF, IF THE FBI SNOOPED
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WASHINGTON

A prominent Washington bank, bending to protests from an irate depositor, has reluctantly apologized for allowing the FBI to illegally obtain details of his checking account during the Watergate investigation.

The apology from Riggs National Bank exposes another chapter in the 1972 scandal, when the FBI's unauthorized probe of bank accounts killed initial efforts to investigate the burglary at the Democratic National Headquarters that eventually led to the resignation of President Richard Nixon.

Elias Demetracopoulos, a self-exiled Greek journalist living in the United States, told United Press International that after years of efforts he finally received an apology from Riggs last week for allowing the FBI to see his accounts without a subpoena.

The letter, written by Thomas Wren, Riggs vice chairman of the board, insisted "our repeated investigations have disclosed no evidence that records concerning your account were furnished to the FBI."

But he added: "Of course, we could not rule out the possibility that a bank employee, on his own, might have made an unauthorized disclosure of this information to the FBI that was not reflected in our records," an official wrote. "If such an unauthorized disclosure was made, we would like to extend to you our most sincere apologies."

Among the canceled checks the FBI obtained was one for \$150 made out to Demetracopoulos from the Wall Street firm of Sartorius & Co. The money was an advance for airline and other expenses incurred in arranging for Rep. Wright Patman, D-Texas, to host a well-publicized dinner meeting of the New York financial community in June 1971.

Patman, since deceased, was then the chairman of the House Banking, Finance and Urban Affairs Committee. He wanted to launch an investigation to trace the currency found on the Watergate burglars in the initial stages of that affair.

Demetracopoulos said he was labeled an opponent to the Nixon administration because he told a congressional committee that the Greek military junta that seized power in 1967 secretly channelled money it allegedly received from the Central Intelligence Agency into Nixon's election campaign.

To retaliate, Demetracopoulos was labeled a communist, rumors he deny and have not been proven.

Demetracopoulos charged the \$150 check obtained by the FBI was leaked by the Nixon administration to Patman's committee. Committee members, fearing repercussions from the chairman's contact with Demetracopoulos, scuttled the first Watergate investigation.

Under the Financial Privacy Act of 1978, investigators and government agencies are severely restricted in their efforts to see bank records. In most cases, a warrant must be obtained and the bank customer must be notified and given a chance to block the search in court.

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However, the Justice Department has begun efforts to amend the law. Officials argue some snooping is needed to help authorities crack down on money-laundering by drug traffickers and other criminals.

Since then, Demetracopoulos has obtained voluminous material from the FBI under the Freedom of Information Act, confirming he was under investigation but no wrongdoing was found. He insisted on an apology from Riggs, which maintained it never officially divulged details of the accounts to the FBI.

Demetracopoulos said although 'many questions remain unanswered' he had decided to accept the apology and close the books on the affair.